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TAGS: PREL PGOV MARR CO

SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR VISIT OF MINISTER OF DEFENSE
OSPINAS (FEBRUARY 26-28)

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Milton K. Drucker;
Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Colombia faces a four front war -- narcotics, FARC, ELN, paramilitaries -- and a growing concern about Venezuela. With U.S. assistance, it is fighting each of the fronts with a slightly different mix of political, military, and police measures, all of which are expensive and at times controversial. A multi-phased offensive by the security forces has re-taken key territory from the FARC. The paramilitary peace process has led to the demobilization of over 22,000 with several thousand more expected. Three U.S. citizens have been held hostage by the FARC for three years now; their safe recovery continues to be one of our top

priorities. Colombia's human rights record, although imperfect, is improving. Congressional elections will be held March 12. President Uribe, whose approval rating tops 70 percent, is expected to win re-election on May 28. The Colombian economy, which made great strides in 2005, continues to improve. U.S.-Colombian Free Trade Agreement negotiations have been strained but may be coming to a close.
End Summary.

U.S. Assistance Key to Security Improvements

¶2. (C) USG assistance to Colombia is premised on combating the interrelated issues of drug trafficking and terrorism and includes training, material aid, and guidance to the security forces and other institutions. President Uribe and Colombian Minister of Defense (MOD) Camilo Ospina Bernal have characterized the United States as Colombia's most important ally. Since taking office, President Uribe has focused on establishing a state presence throughout national territory.

-- Plan Patriota, the military's multi-phased campaign to re-take areas dominated by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), is in its third year and continues to be focused on traditional FARC strongholds in southern Colombia. The logistical strain of keeping more than 15,000 troops in the dense, hostile jungle, hundreds of miles from their supply bases, is a huge challenge. The priority for DOD funding is to provide assistance for forces involved in Plan Patriota. Infectious diseases -- especially leishmaniasis, a parasitic skin infection -- and landmines are the leading causes of military casualties. The GOC is seeking U.S. assistance for the high cost of leishmaniasis treatment.

-- The FARC staged fewer attacks on population centers in 2005, but doubled the number of electrical towers blown up,

increased the number of attacks on oil pipelines, and caused more casualties than in 2005. This may imply that GOC forces are stretched thin or that the FARC is picking its targets more carefully.

-- With support from the U.S. MILGRP, the GOC formed in 2005 the Center for Coordinated Integral Action, an interagency center to facilitate social services in seven areas that have traditionally lacked state presence and been subject to pressure from illegal armed groups. More than 40,000 individuals have been enrolled in state health care, and judges, investigators, and public defenders have been placed in all 16 municipalities of the JTF Omega area.

-- Bilateral counter-drug cooperation remains excellent, but has been complicated at times by competition for scarce helicopters between the counter-terror and counter-drug efforts. Eradication and interdiction are at record levels. Over 140,000 hectares of coca and 1,600 hectares of opium poppy were eradicated aerially in 2005, surpassing 2004 levels. Ground fire against spray planes is below 2003 levels but remains problematic. One pilot was killed and one aircraft was lost to hostile fire impacts in 2005. The GOC continues to pursue manual eradication, particularly in national parks and indigenous areas. While the GOC claims that over 30,000 hectares of coca were manually eradicated in 2005, it remains a dangerous option. Six Colombian National Police were killed and seven injured in early February while protecting manual eradication efforts in La Macarena National Park.

-- The Colombian military justice system has traditionally been plagued with impunity and inefficiency. We continually press the Defense Ministry to create a system that delivers credible findings to ensure expeditious justice for both the innocent and the guilty. Director of Military Justice, Brigadier General Puentes, has begun phase two of a

Congressionally-approved reform strategy to address these problems. The bulk of the reforms, however, are waiting Congressional approval.

Regional Issues: Venezuela and Ecuador

¶3. (C) We have stressed to the GOC the importance of regional counter-terror and counter-drug cooperation, however political tensions have hindered that cooperation at times. Colombia remains concerned about Venezuela's arms build-up, and has begun to divert needed resources away from counter-drug and counter-terror priorities. Colombia has proposed a closer bilateral defense relationship with the U.S. as a partial solution. Uribe remains wary of Chavez's intentions in the region, but prefers to manage the Chavez problem rather than confront it directly, especially during the election season.

¶4. (C) Colombia and Ecuador continue to grapple with the FARC's presence in Ecuador and the number of displaced Colombians residing there. In late January, the Colombian military entered Ecuadorian territory while pursuing the FARC. The Government of Ecuador (GOE) demanded an apology, which the GOC provided, despite frustration with the lack of Ecuadorian cooperation against the FARC. The apology eased tensions, but not completely. The GOE's international efforts to end aerial eradication along the two countries' shared border is increasingly of concern to the USG.

Peace Process

¶5. (SBU) The GOC began negotiations with the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) in 2002. Over 22,000 AUC members have demobilized since 2003; a few thousand more are expected before the March 12 Congressional elections. In addition, over 8,000 illegal armed group members (from the

FARC, ELN and AUC) have individually deserted and entered the government's reinsertion program since 2002. The program has limited funding and weak management, but is slowly improving.

Uribe approved, but "suspended" extradition to the U.S. for two key paramilitaries as a lever for their full compliance with their demobilization obligations.

¶6. (C) The National Liberation Army (ELN) began preliminary talks with the GOC in December 2005 in Cuba. The second round of this exploratory phase will begin on February 17. To date, the FARC has refused to enter into peace talks with the GOC.

¶7. (C) Colombia's Law of Justice and Peace, signed by Uribe in July 2005, governs demobilization for ex-paramilitaries. The Law offers demobilized terrorists a five- to eight-year sentence, followed by two-and-a-half to four-year parole period, but only if they fully demobilize, turn over all assets, release all hostages and child soldiers, and give reparations (actual or symbolic) to victims. Individuals or groups organized for drug trafficking or illicit enrichment are not eligible for reduced sentences and only crimes committed during membership in, and the service of, the illegal armed group are eligible. Rigorous implementation of the law is key to ensuring both peace and justice in Colombia.

U.S. Hostages

¶8. (C) The three U.S. contractors captured by the FARC in February 2003 are now the longest held U.S. political hostages in the world. Their safe release continues to be one of our top priorities. The Colombians are providing full assistance. Plan Patriota operations have increased the likelihood that we will receive more information about the hostages, but also that an unintended encounter between Colombian forces and the hostage holders could result in their execution. Uribe has assured us that the U.S. hostages will be included in any humanitarian exchange. The Embassy held a commemoration ceremony on February 13, marking the third anniversary of their capture.

Human Rights Record Improving

¶9. (C) The Uribe Administration continues to make progress in human rights, but needs to do more to ensure accountability, strengthen the military justice system, break unauthorized low-level military ties to paramilitary groups, and end corruption. The government has a difficult but

active dialogue with NGOs, the United Nations, and foreign governments. Human rights training is mandatory for all members of the military and police. The GOC claims to have trained 100,000 officials in human rights in the past year and a half. Less than two percent of human rights violations are attributable to government security forces, according to GOC statistics. Homicides fell by 16 percent (the lowest number in 18 years), kidnappings by 62 percent, and forced displacements by 37 percent in 2005, building on 2004's trends.

Internal Politics

¶10. (C) As a result of an historic Constitutional Court decision in October 2005, President Uribe is the first President to run for re-election in decades. Given approval ratings over 70 percent, he is expected to win on May 28. Congressional elections will be held March 12. The outcome of these elections is less certain. They may further weaken the Liberal and Conservative Parties, whose machines have dominated Colombian politics since the 19th century, in favor of broad center-right (aligned with Uribe) and center-left coalitions.

Positive Economic Outlook

¶11. (U) Tremendous gains in security have helped the Colombian economy. In 2005, Colombia's gross domestic product (GDP) increased by 5.2 percent as a result of increased foreign and domestic investment and increased exports.

Although the International Monetary Fund has recommended that Colombia revamp its tax system, fiscal reform was not addressed during the most recent session of Congress.

Unemployment remains high, but has dropped to just over 10 percent (from 15 percent when Uribe took office in 2002).

¶12. (SBU) Free Trade Agreement negotiations between the U.S. and Colombia are nearing conclusion, with agricultural and intellectual property rights issues the most prominent remaining issues.

DRUCKER